

NEWSRELEASE

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Survey assesses corrections workers' attitudes toward sex offenders

The large majority of corrections professionals supervising offenders in Montana communities recognize that treatment, not life sentences, is the best means of managing the population of sex offenders, a new survey shows.

However, those same people also acknowledge that most sex offenders are dangerous.

Those are some of the findings in a survey of 307 corrections workers across Montana, conducted by a student and faculty member from the School of Social Work at the University of Montana. Almost six out of every 10 people surveyed worked in probation and parole or at prerelease centers.

The survey, done as an independent study course and at no cost to the Department of Corrections, concluded that the cooperation provided by the agency is noteworthy. "The willingness of the DOC to assess its own workforce's attitudes evidences a progressive approach to the management of this controversial population," the authors wrote.

Corrections Department Director Mike Ferriter said it was important to measure the attitudes of corrections staff because it encourages people to take a close look at their preconceived views on sex offenders and to consider whether they are correct and appropriate.

"That's just what we believe society in general must do in regard to this challenging population," he said. "Broad assumptions need to be reconsidered if we are to make headway in effectively managing and treating sex offenders.

"We know that most sex offenders eventually return to the community, that they commit new crimes at a lower rate than other offenders and that treatment works to reduce repeat offenses," he said. "This survey provides a valuable glimpse into the minds of those most knowledgeable about sex offenders because they deal with them every day."

The survey was conducted by Kirsten Balow, an undergraduate student, and by Associate Professor Tim Conley, both from the School of Social Work.

(more)

By engaging in this progressive approach to understanding a controversial population, “Montana contributes to the national professional body of knowledge concerning community corrections with this challenging group of offenders,” Conley said.

Also, he said, state agencies that work with the university system are able to benefit from ambitious bright students who can contribute meaningful work as part of their education.

The report found that 82 percent of those surveyed believe sex offenders should not be locked up for life and that rehabilitation is valuable for them. The same percentage agreed that most sex offenders are dangerous, and 93 percent said they do not believe that sex offenders receive prison sentences that are “much too long” when compared to those given for other crimes.

Fifty-five percent said sex offenders can change their behavior with support and therapy. Sixty percent said they do not think sex offenders should lose their civil rights and a similar proportion – 65 percent – said sex offenders should wear electronic tracking devices that show their location at all times.

All but 2 percent of those taking the survey said they see no difference between sex crimes committed against a stranger and those committed against an acquaintance. Likewise, 98 percent said the exertion of emotional control over sexual assault victims is just as bad as physical control.

“One conclusion is that corrections workers do not differentiate dangerousness or severity based on whether the crime involves emotional coercion or familiarity with the victim,” the report said.

Large majorities of those polled rejected stereotypical views of sex offenders. Ninety-four percent rejected the perception that most sex offenders are unmarried men, 87 percent said sex offender do not have trouble making friends and 83 percent said sex offenders are not loners who prefer to stay home. Eighty-two percent disagreed with the view that sex offenders have a stronger sexual urge than the average person and a comparable number – 78 percent – said sex offenders do not have a high incidence of sexual activity.

“The findings of this survey provide some valuable and credible insights as to the makeup of this offender population,” Ferriter said.

The survey findings can found at: http://www.cor.mt.gov/Issues/UofMReportStudy_CCD-SexOffenderAttitudes.pdf